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1 April 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Bombing Decisions --
31 March and 1 November 1968

1. Much ink has already been shed, and more is sure to follow, on the background considerations that lay behind President Johnson's decision to curtail the bombing of North Vietnam, enunciated in his 31 March 1968 TV address, and his decision to halt the bombing altogether on 1 November 1968. Most of what has appeared to date has been mythology laced with special pleading, or vice versa, couched as political theater -- a psychodrama in which the forces of good contended with the forces of evil in a struggle for the "President's mind." This approach is palpably rooted in misinformation or distorted nonsense since it implicitly portrays President Johnson as a malleable, passive patsy -- a ridiculous characterization.

2. There was, of course, a lot of background behind President Johnson's 31 March and 1 November decisions -- both of which were very much his decisions and not anyone else's. There was also a lot of pulling and hauling (and leaking) within the upper echelons of government, much of it of considerably greater importance to the pullers and haulers than to the President himself. The Agency played some hand in some of this background evolution. This memorandum attempts to refresh your memory by summarizing our more important contributory efforts.

3. The Bombing Studies. Our least dramatic but probably most important contribution was the series of bombing studies going back to the fall of 1965, especially "McNamara II" ("The Will to Persist" memorandum) of 26 August 1966. This series continued through the end of the bombing itself. It was augmented in October 1968 by a related set of special reports specifically prepared for your use and distribution at the White House meetings in the three weeks prior to the 1 November 1968 announcement. The Agency's analysis of relevant data was a model of

NSC review completed.

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professional thoroughness, but our conclusions were consistent and fairly simple: Because of the nature of North Vietnam's economy and the kind of war Hanoi was fighting, bombing (no matter how unrestricted) could not render North Vietnam physically incapable of carrying on the struggle. Bombing could, and did, inhibit the flow of men and materiel to the south and make their dispatch more costly, but bombing could not physically prevent Hanoi from meeting the external support requirements of its southern forces. Thus, in the final analysis, the bombing program had to be weighed in light of its political rather than its physical or military impact.

4. The October 1967 "Alternatives" Study. In (to the best of my recollection) late September 1967, at Secretary McNamara's request and with your approval, Messrs. Warnke, Halperin, Lehman and myself were convened as a quiet quartet to canvass possible alternative strategies in Vietnam. (Warnke was then Assistant Secretary/ISA and Mort Halperin was his Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy Planning.) We met several times during October 1967. (I particularly remember holding our 14 October meeting in my office because of the march on the Pentagon that was then taking place.) The idea was that we would produce a joint paper. We did produce a joint first draft -- entitled, "An Alternative Fifteen Month Program for Vietnam" -- which I handed to Secretary McNamara on 23 October 1967. My transmittal memorandum to Mr. McNamara made it clear that this was but a first draft and also contained the following paragraph:

"We recognize, and caution, that this is a draft in two senses: (1) the treatment of the points covered can be improved and (2) the paper, in its present form, is incomplete. You asked for an optimum fifteen month scenario. We have opened with a bombing pause but have not blocked out the play of the remainder of the hand. "

5. Aside from some comments of appreciation Mr. McNamara voiced when I handed him the draft and its transmittal memorandum, neither Lehman nor I heard anything more of this exercise. If there was a final (Warnke/Halperin) version, we never saw it. We assumed that for some reason the paper quietly died. On reviewing even our joint first draft with the perspective of hindsight, however, this paper's ultimate function becomes much clearer. Lacking the caveats and other

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considerations Lehman and I would have included in any final version we would have been willing to endorse, our unbalanced draft could have been read as a brief for a curtailment, if not suspension, of the bombing plus the opening of negotiations. It contained in well developed outline almost all the arguments that Warnke -- and Halperin -- successfully urged on Clifford during March 1968.

25X9 6. To digress for a moment, I am convinced that Halperin played a pivotal role in shaping Warnke's (and, through Warnke, Clifford's) views. [REDACTED]

7. The November 1967 "Wise Men" Briefing. In November 1967, President Johnson convened a council of "wise men" for briefings and discussions on Vietnam. On the night of 1 November, the group convened at the State Department for briefings followed by a working dinner. Present in the briefing room were Messrs. Rusk, McNamara, Wheeler, Rostow, Helms, Katzenbach, Harriman, William Bundy, Philip Habib and myself from the government. The invited "wise men" present at the briefing were Messrs. Acheson, Ball, General Bradley, McGeorge Bundy, Clifford, Arthur Dean, Douglas Dillon, Justice Fortas, Cabot Lodge and Robert Murphy. General Wheeler briefed on the military situation and William Bundy on the South Vietnam political situation. You and I split the Agency briefing. I discoursed on overall Communist capabilities and intentions and you handled the Viet Cong infrastructure. In the fall of 1967, things looked reasonably good in South Vietnam and the briefings reflected this. I do not have my notes and did not write a text, but do recall pointing out the surface tenuousness of recent pacification gains, the fragility of the political situation in Saigon, the Communists' continuing determination and their obvious need to do something to reverse then current trends. The briefings all seemed quite well received. You attended the dinner that followed them but I did not.

8. The next day (2 November 1967) the President held a session and discussion with the "wise men" in the Cabinet room. The other government officials present included Messrs. Rusk, McNamara, Rostow, Katzenbach, Harriman, William Bundy and yourself. There were two variations in the roster of "wise men." General Maxwell Taylor, who missed the briefing dinner, attended the Cabinet room session and

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Justice Fortas, who attended the briefing dinner, was apparently not present on 2 November. I did not attend the 2 November meeting and, hence, cannot comment on it.

9. The Acheson Conversations. On 27 February, Dean Acheson came to the Agency for a conversation with both of us in your office, followed by a rather lengthy conversation with me in my office. As I recall, he said that the President had asked him for some thoughts on Vietnam and, being badly out of touch, he wanted a rundown on current and recent happenings and their import. Our conversations were frank, cordial and informal. On 12 March, per your instructions, I went to Dean Acheson's Georgetown home for a second Vietnam session. Also present at that gathering were Acheson, Philip Habib, (then) Major General William DePuy, Richard Steadman (Warnke's ISA Deputy for the Far East) and William Jordan (Rostow's assistant). At Acheson's request, we engaged in a frank, full discussion of the whole Vietnam situation inventorying post-Tet '68 positions, problems and prospects. Per our instructions, nothing was held back and the arguments got pretty brisk. The participants reflected almost the entire spectrum of informed official opinion, from the very dovish Steadman to the JCS-minded (but fairly so) DePuy. No firm conclusions were reached or recommendations offered, but Acheson thanked us all and said we had given him just what he wanted.

10. Dealings with Clifford. Throughout 1967 (and 1966) I had come to know Clifford quite well through his activities as Chairman of the PFIAB, which I briefed on Vietnam developments at each of its meetings. After his appointment as Secretary of Defense was announced, at his request (and with your approval) I went to his office on at least two occasions to discuss Vietnam with him in detail. We spent two hours together the night before his Senate confirmation hearings prepping him for troublesome Vietnam questions that might arise. At his explicit request, my Monday sessions with the Secretary of Defense that McNamara had initiated in the fall of 1966 continued without a break after Clifford assumed that office.

11. The March 1968 Task Force. In late February 1968, by direction of President Johnson, a Task Force was convened under Clifford's chairmanship to review the Vietnam bidding in light of Tet offensive developments, Wheeler's visit to Westmoreland, and the Westmoreland "request" for 206,000 troops. The course of events here gets more than a little complicated. In early February, Westmoreland

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came in (apparently on request) with a tentative list of immediate needs and future requirements. This cable was discussed at an 11 February White House meeting chaired by President Johnson and attended by Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, General Wheeler, Clark Clifford, Walt Rostow, General Maxwell Taylor, Tom Johnson and yourself. This meeting produced further cables and additional White House meetings on 12 and 13 February, which you attended. One of the results of this intense discussion and bidding review was General Wheeler's trip to Vietnam, which he first mentioned as a possibility in his cable to Westmoreland commenting on the 11 February meeting. On 28 February you attended a breakfast session with the President convened to hear General Wheeler's trip report (Wheeler came directly to the breakfast from his plane). At 1300 that same day (28 February), Mr. McNamara was given a medal at a White House ceremony that was followed (at 1500) by another business meeting on Vietnam attended by McNamara, Clifford and others, including yourself. It was at this meeting that the "Clifford Task Force" review was commissioned and launched. Clifford was sworn in as Secretary of Defense on 1 March.

12. The Task Force met in plenary session on Saturday, 2 March, and Sunday, 3 March. At your request, I came in at lunch time on 2 March, remained the rest of the day and attended (with you) all day on Sunday, 3 March. There may have been a preliminary 1 March organizational session but my notes don't reflect it. After 3 March, to my knowledge there were no more plenary sessions with all members attending.

13. Clifford was in the chair at all sessions. The 2 and 3 March sessions were attended by Fowler (definitely 2 March, I think also 3 March but notes do not say), Rusk, Bundy, Habib (also Katzenbach briefly), Nitze, Warnke, Halperin (in and out), Goulding, Wheeler, Maxwell Taylor, Rostow, Helms (and myself). You submitted three Agency papers, all included in the notebook Bundy put together for the guidance of all Committee members.

a. On 2 March you handed out a 26 February 1968 ONE paper entitled, "The Outlook in Vietnam" and a 29 February collective effort entitled, "Communist Alternatives in Vietnam."

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b. At the 3 March meeting, you handed out around the table a 1 March paper entitled, "Questions Concerning the Situation in Vietnam." The questions were posed by Bundy as part of the staff work on this Task Force exercise. This paper's only distribution was the copies you passed out at the 3 March meeting, but portions of it were subsequently leaked to the New York Times

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14. The two days of plenary discussion (2 and 3 March) covered every aspect of the Vietnam situation, its impact on the United States, and the probable consequences on both sides of the Pacific of the whole spectrum of possible U.S. Government actions. The Agency's input was scrupulously confined to intelligence judgments (on the situation, the politico-military balance of forces, probable Communist reactions to various possible U.S. actions, etc.). This input was made via the papers outlined above, your remarks at the table and one or two comments from me.

15. The upshot of the two-day session was that a final paper was to be prepared for the President after some additional homework had been done by some of the participants. My notes unambiguously indicate, however, that Clifford pulled together the sense of the Sunday (3 March) meeting by saying the paper to the President would recommend:

(1) Granting the first request (i. e., Westmoreland's immediate needs.)

(2) Getting (the U.S. Government) in position to meet further requests if Washington made the later policy decision to do so.

(3) Any emergency (MACV) needs would be met as soon as possible.

(4) There should be a study in depth of new strategic guidance.

(5) We should utilize withholding (reinforcements) as a means of leverage to ascertain what we can get out of the GVN and ARVN.

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16. Rusk noted at the close of the 3 March meeting that the President would want to look at the general policy (implications of the Task Force paper) and would "want it reviewed in great detail."

17. I never saw the final paper that went forward to President Johnson but recall your telling me that it substantially followed the line Clifford outlined. The Task Force's deliberations did not focus on the issue of curtailing the bombing and so far as I am aware, this matter was not even specifically mentioned in the summary written report submitted to the President. The 2/3 March weekend's work was reviewed and discussed at a meeting in the White House Cabinet room at 1730 on Monday, 4 March. This meeting was convened by the President and attended by Vice President Humphrey, Secretary Rusk, Secretary Clifford, Mr. Rostow, Mr. Nitze, General Wheeler, General Maxwell Taylor and yourself. I did not attend but you told me in a subsequent conversation that Secretary Clifford reported on the meetings over the preceding weekend and spoke about what he called "our problem," namely that troop increases would not necessarily "get us where we want to go." Clifford said we were at what he termed a "clearly defined watershed" and that we needed "strategic guidance." On behalf of the Task Force, he recommended that we "give Westmoreland his first cut" (i.e., meet emergency requirements) then "review the whole matter in depth, looking to other options." The whole Vietnam issue was discussed further at a lunch with the President on Tuesday, 5 March, and a 6 March NSC meeting, both of which you attended (and I, of course, did not). You attended other White House meetings and/or lunches devoted in whole or in part to Vietnam on March 8, 11, 12 and 19.

18. Second "Wise Men" Briefing. On Monday, 25 March, there was a second convocation of "wise men" at the State Department in preparation for a 26 March meeting with President Johnson. This time the briefings came after dinner and the group participating was slightly different from the group that met on 1-2 November 1967. The government officials present at the 25 March briefing session were Secretary Rusk, Secretary Clifford, Mr. Rostow, Mr. Vance, yourself, William Bundy, General DePuy and myself. (Neither your notes nor mine show General Wheeler as having attended.) Ambassador Lodge and Governor Harriman were both present. The other "wise men" at

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the briefing were Messrs. Dean Acheson, George Ball, General Bradley, McGeorge Bundy, Arthur Dean, Douglas Dillon, Justice Fortas, Ambassador Goldberg, Robert Murphy, General Ridgway and General Maxwell Taylor.

19. DePuy, I and Habib gave oral briefings (in that order) on the military situation, the enemy's capabilities and intentions, and the political situation. The briefings were candid and forthright but not, to my recollection, excessively gloomy. The Vietnam picture at that time was a mixture of plusses and minuses which we all attempted to outline objectively and fairly. I did not have (or make) a text, but a copy of the rather detailed notes from which I talked are appended to this memo to refresh your memory. There was some brisk questioning after I spoke but the audience seemed appreciative. I said nothing radically out of line with Agency reporting and interpretative analysis or out of line with what I had been saying to both Clifford and Rostow. Walt chatted with me as the meeting broke up and though he took issue with me on some points of detail, he was quite complimentary. I certainly do not recall his voicing any surprise or shock.

20. Session with President Johnson. On Wednesday, 27 March you called me and told me to present myself at the Cabinet room at 1600 prepared to give the same briefing I had given the "wise men" the preceding Monday night. Walking down the White House hall you tipped me off that the President had been surprised at the positions taken by the "wise men" on 26 March and wanted to hear for himself the briefings they had been given. Phil Habib was out of town, but Bill DePuy and I gave the President a rerun of our Monday evening remarks.

21. To the best of my recollection, ranged around the Cabinet table were yourself, Walt Rostow, Vice President Humphrey, President Johnson, General Abrams and General Wheeler. There were also a few strays in the room (including an Air Force enlisted man in fatigues who wandered in, was told to sit down and proved to be Pat Nugent). After Bill DePuy finished his recap of the military briefing, I took the Secretary of Defense's chair directly across the Cabinet table from the President, pulled out the notes I had used Monday night, and launched forth.

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22. Amidst various phone calls received and placed on miscellaneous matters, President Johnson -- a very impressive figure at that range and under those circumstances -- listened intently, often interrupting with questions. As time wore on, he began asking if that was all or if I had finished. Gulping mentally, I kept replying no, there were some additional points and considerations he ought to hear. With a grin, he then would bid me to continue, which I did until the full presentation was complete. If President Johnson was upset or distressed, he certainly did not show it. In fact he started to walk out of the room then turned to walk its full length to where I was standing, shook hands, thanked me warmly for my presentation, and made some gracious remarks about my overall work and contribution to the national effort. As you may recall, the Vice President walked out of the White House with us and the three of us chatted for a bit outside the door. Mr. Humphrey was complimentary about the briefing and said he could tell that the President had liked it very much.

23. Session with McPherson. At some point in this late March 1968 period, Harry McPherson (then one of the President's speech writers) came to my office for a complete bidding review and discussion on Vietnam that lasted almost two hours. I remember the occasion well but am hazy on the precise date. (I believe it was either Friday, 22 March, or Tuesday, 26 March.) I kept no notes or record on this session but clearly recall covering almost exactly the same points covered in the briefing given the "wise men" on 25 March and the President on 27 March.

24. Session with Vice President Humphrey. During our sidewalk conversation after the 27 March session with President Johnson, Vice President Humphrey asked me if I would write down my points on the background evolution of the Vietnam struggle, the Communist Party's role therein and Hanoi's overall strategy in a form suitable for his use in an unclassified speech. This I did and, per his request, took the draft speech to his office on the afternoon of Saturday, 30 March. He skimmed the draft, thanked me for it and we talked for about an hour about Vietnam. Whether or not the Vice President knew what President Johnson planned to say in the following day's scheduled speech, Mr. Humphrey (quite properly) gave me no inkling of the President's intentions. Mr. Humphrey did, however, make a point of thanking me

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again for my 27 March briefing and stressed that in his opinion, President Johnson had liked the briefing and found it helpful.

25. The November 1968 Halt. The above paragraphs cover Agency actions possibly germane to the considerations and deliberations leading to President Johnson's 31 March 1968 speech that announced a curtailment of the bombing and made a call for the opening of negotiations. The Agency's actions or inputs pertinent to the deliberations leading to the 1 November complete bombing halt were much more limited, primarily because of the "freeze" on relevant traffic and reporting that President Johnson instituted on 11 October. Our October 1968 involvement was thus confined to whatever comments or intelligence judgments you may have personally offered at White House meetings, plus the closely held intelligence memoranda and studies that were sent to Secretary Rusk and Mr. Rostow or personally distributed by you at these October 1968 meetings.

[REDACTED]
George A. Carver, Jr.

Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

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Attachment

"Notes for Establishment Briefing II - 25 March 1968"

1 Memo to DC / ✓
1 - Mac Chono

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NOTES FOR ESTABLISHMENT BRIEFING II - 25 March 1968

I. Back to 1st principles:

- (a) Unwavering objective of Lao Dong Politburo: political control over all of Vietnam.
- (b) Negative corollary: prevent evolution of Viet state structure ^{not} ~~under~~ under Communist control.
- (c) It was to accomplish this that insurgency started in 1st place.

II. Phases of development:

- (a) Subversion: '57 - '64
- (b) National liberation war: '59 - '64
- (c) NVN commitment: '64 - '65 (coup de grace)
- (d) Response to US involvement: '65 - '67
- (e) We now in a new phase

III. Current activity outgrowth of strategic discussion going on since last spring (Truong Son/Giap) and, probably, strategic review and decisions made last summer:

- (a) Analysis difficult, confident tone: have mastered special war, coping with limited war. Discounting of 700,000. The tasks (search and destroy, pacification), the contradictions (US, US/GVN, GVN/people).
- (b) On other hand: major trends adverse
 - (1) dearth of tactical success (loss of strategic initiative)
 - (2) losses
 - (3) shrinkage of population base
 - (4) evolution of state structure
- (c) Decision made to increase asset commitment (and, unavoidably, risk) to achieve decisive results in '68:
 - (1) reverse trends

(2) collapse GVN militarily and civilly, thus

(3) destroy political basis for US presence

(4) crack US will

(d) Many factors entered in, but probably main ones were:

(1) GVN still frail

(2) US political climate increasingly adverse, our reluctance to commit troops

IV. Strategy implemented during "winter-spring" offensive:

(a) Initial phase devoted to dispersing US forces (Loc Ninh, Dak To, I Corps) and preparing for urban assault.

(b) Second phase kicked off with "Tet offensive" coordinated attacks on more than 100 targets.

V. Results of Tet offensive:

(a) True net balance hard to draw

(b) Maximum objectives failed

(c) Casualties, (over 71,000): qualitative and quantitative

(d) Wrong to think in terms of completed action

VI. Present Enemy objectives:

(a) Burr at ARVN morale and capability, if possible induce surrender or defection

(b) Burr at GVN civil capacity

(c) Compound GVN administrative problems

(d) Recruit and organize in countryside

(e) Erode (shatter) Viet confidence in GVN

(f) Erode US will to continue struggle

VII. Present security situation:

- (a) Enemy ringing most population centers
- (b) Enemy taking advantage of GVN absence from countryside
- (c) Enemy political exploitation (forcing allied destruction of pacified hamlets)
- (d) Economic strangulation

VIII. Enemy problems:

- (a) Excessive propaganda claims and lack of initial political or military success
- (b) Forces over-extended and logistics strained. Stockpiles and stores destroyed
- (c) Qualitative losses
- (d) Morale problems on re-assault
- (e) Command and control problems
- (f) Loss of advantages such as surprise

IX. Enemy intentions -- maintain pressure almost certainly with some additional major attacks:

- (a) I Corps pressure and re-investiture of Hue, Quang Tri.
 - (1) NVN movement-urgency (2 divisions)
 - (2) force repositioning

(b) Harassment

(c) At least some provincial towns: Banmethout, Kontum

X. Negotiations: put and call.

XI. The outlook:

- (a) Next three months likely to be decisive

- (b) US contribution will be primarily one of projected attitude
- (c) Primary burden of coping with enemy's thrust must perforce fall on GVN and its response will be prime determinant of struggle's eventual outcome

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INFILTRATION

November '67	3,400
December '67	2,200
January '68	19,400 a) - + 4-5,000
February '68	est. 3,000 b) - 4,000
March '68	est. 7,000 b)
April '68	8,000 b)

a) CIA would carry this as December infiltration; in addition we estimate an additional 4-5,000 for January.

b) CIA estimates; March and April are minimum figures, especially April.

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